

African-American Women and the Effects of Racism and Sexism in 2020 v. in *Beloved*

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2020

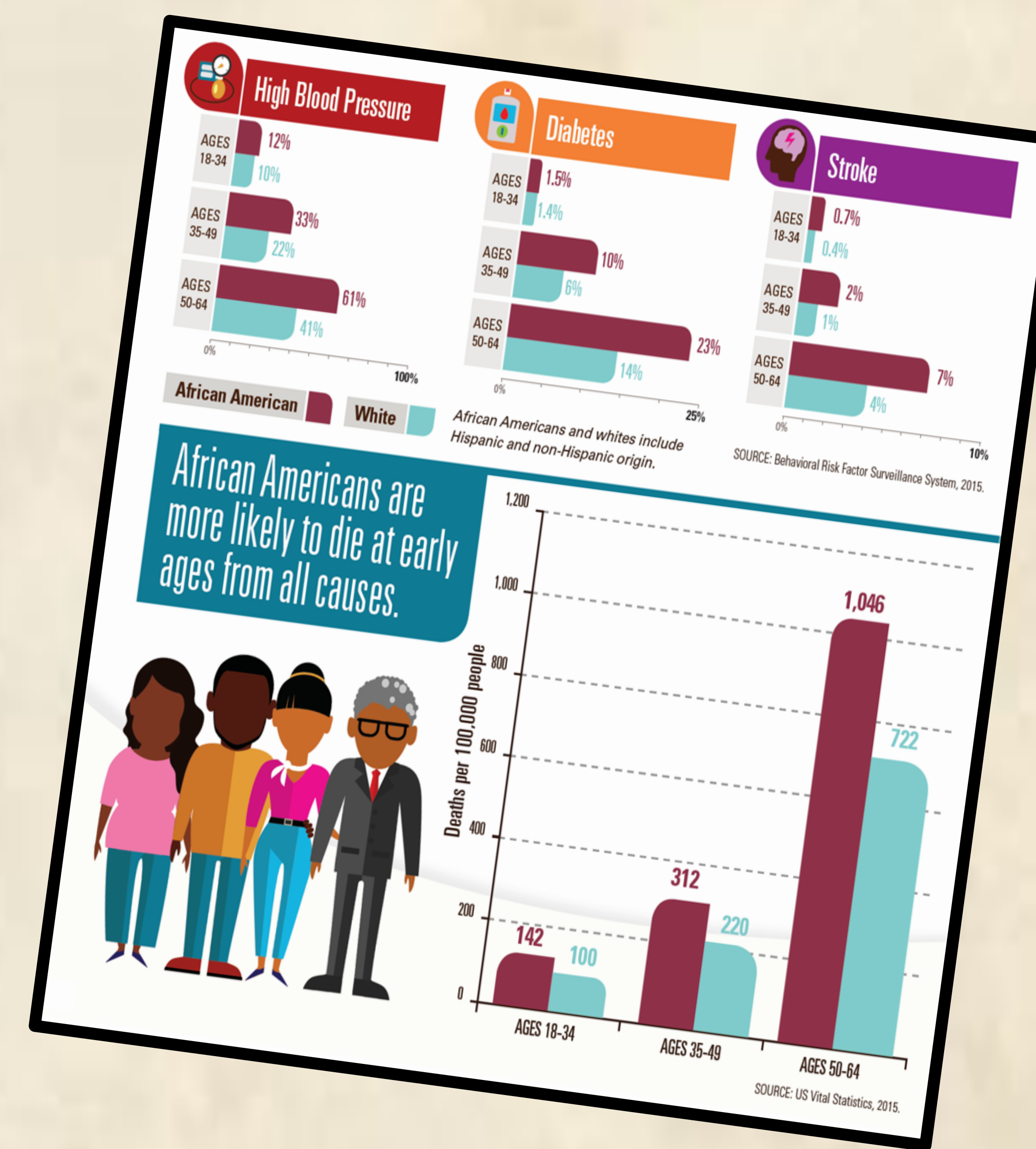
African-American women in 2020 are constantly subjected to, not only racism, but sexism as well. Whether explicit or implicit, both of these “isms” negatively affect the emotional, mental, and physical health of black women. Being told on a regular basis that they are “inferior” as a race or sexually objectified as women, characterized as weak, or given unequal opportunities, black women today are at a higher risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, hormone imbalances, and many more physical ailments.

The stress of trying to be a “superwoman” also negatively affects mental health. Imagine being told (or shown) on a daily basis that you are “inferior” or being sexually objectified. This would, of course, elicit problems with self-esteem and self-image. According to Dr. Erica Richards of Johns Hopkins, women are especially susceptible to feelings of anxiety and depression, but African-American women are less likely to report it or seek help. This stems from the desire to be strong and handle things on their own.

The Connection

Beloved can be connected to this current issue of 2020 through Sethe and Beloved. Beloved, the woman, represents the history of slavery and the impact of slavery on African-Americans years after the fact. Beloved’s arrival marks when Sethe begins to recover memories of the sexism and racism that she endured at the hands of white people. Sethe recounts how schoolteacher’s nephews sexually assaulted her as they “came in there and took [her] milk...held [her] down and took it (Morrison 19). Sethe’s reason for killing her child in the first place is to spare her from the white man’s rape as she feared that schoolteacher would “measure [her] behind before he tore it up” (Morrison 239). This illustrates the harmful effects of sexism and racism that can be paralleled to the mental and physical health problems faced by black women today.

The most significant tie between today and *Beloved* is perhaps the impact Beloved has on Sethe at the end of the novel. Morrison writes that “the bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became...” and that “Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur” (Morrison 294-5). The impact of Sethe’s decision to kill her child and the impact of slavery as a whole, what Beloved represents, eat Sethe alive. She is driven to insanity and becomes weak and malnourished. This perfectly encompasses how racism and sexism can deteriorate the health of black women both physically and emotionally.



Beloved

In the novel *Beloved*, the main character Sethe is, no doubt, a strong woman who tries very hard to handle things on her own. Throughout the novel, Sethe encounters both racism and sexism and must, years later, live with the inevitable emotional, mental, and physical strain. Sethe’s internal strength is evident as she says that she “will never run from another thing on this Earth” (Morrison 18). However, throughout the novel, as she remembers everything that she endured at Sweet Home through Beloved’s questioning, the racism and sexism catch up with her and we watch as her physical and mental health deteriorate. The passages to focus on, when looking at *Beloved* through the lens of mental and physical impact on black women, are:

- When Sethe’s milk was stolen
- When Sethe explains that she killed her child to save her from a life of sexual abuse
- The instances in which Beloved is slowly draining Sethe of her life force



Works Cited

- “Being an African American ‘superwoman’ might come with a price.” *American Heart Association News*, 11 February 2020, <https://www.heart.org/en/news/2020/02/11/being-an-african-american-superwoman-might-come-with-a-price>, 25 October 2020.
- “Mental Health Among African-American Women.” *Johns Hopkins Medicine*, <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/mental-health-among-african-american-women>, 25 October 2020.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York, Vintage International, 2004.

Further Readings

- Barnett, Pamela E. “Figurations of Rape and the Supernatural in *Beloved*.” *PMLA*, vol. 112, no. 3, May 1997, pp. 418-427. *JSTOR*, doi:102307/462950. Accessed 25 October 2020.